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ABSTRACT

Noting that new technologies are resulting in extensive changes in the field of photojournalism, both as it is practiced and taught, this Digest reviews this rapidly evolving field of education and professional practice. It discusses what digital photography is; the history of digital photography; how digital photography has changed photojournalism and photojournalism education; and ethical issues in digital photography. (RS)

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The Evolving Status of Photojournalism Education

by Claude Cookman

New technologies are resulting in extensive changes in the field of photojournalism, both as it is practiced and taught. This Digest will review this rapidly evolving field of education and professional practice.

What is digital photography?

Traditional photography utilizes negative film and positive prints that hold the image in an emulsion of silver for black and white or dyes for color. Light reflected from the subject activates the silver or dyes, forming a latent, invisible image. It is made visible to the human eye by development in a series of chemical baths. These analog images present a continuous tone.

Digital photography records light impulses as electronic charges stored on a computer hard drive or memory disk. The image is a matrix of rows and columns. Where they intersect are small squares called picture elements, or pixels, which carry information about brightness and color. A digital image is discontinuous. Each pixel is separate from its neighbors. Typically the resolution, or number of pixels per inch, is so large that the human eye synthesizes them into an image that appears continuous. But when enlarged sufficiently, the matrix of squares becomes visible. As with all computerized technology, at the most basic level the information in each pixel comprises electronic pulses expressed as a series of 0's and 1's. Digital photographs can undergo the same operations as all computer files, including being edited, stored, copied, transformed into a variety of formats, transmitted over the Internet, deleted, etc. (Corbett, 2002)

What is the history of digital photography?

The development of digital photography occurred in two distinct phases: the digitized image preceded the digital camera. Digital photography had its origins in the 1960s as NASA scientists developed a method for the Voyager space probes to send images back to Earth. Instead of continuous prints, the images were scanned into digital information and transmitted back as electronic signals. For several years, digital photography was limited to scanning analog prints or negatives into pixel files. When Sony introduced the first digital camera, called the Mavica, in 1981, the scanning step could be eliminated. It was possible to produce digital photographs directly with a camera (Wilson, n. d.). As with most computer technology, development of digital cameras proceeded rapidly; as speed and quality increased, costs fell. Beginning in the early 1990s, photojournalists became the first major group of photographers to use digital cameras extensively.

How has digital photography changed photojournalism?

Digital technologies have greatly changed the working methods for photojournalists on assignment and brought major operational and economic advantages to news organizations. In traditional photography, photographers could not be sure of what they had until they processed their film. Digital cameras have display screens that allow photojournalists to review what they have shot while still covering an event. They can decide whether they have the story-telling photographs or need to continue shooting. They can delete inadequate pictures and try them again. They can fill gaps in the visual narrative.

Two major changes serve both photojournalists and their news organizations. Considerable time is saved by eliminating the darkroom phase of traditional photography. Time formerly required to process film, make prints and send those prints through the engraving process can now be spent covering the event. By one photographer's account, at least 25 minutes is saved by eliminating chemical processing. (Kobré, 1996) Much time is also saved on the logistics of getting the images back to the publication. Instead of driving back to the office, photographers can plug the camera's memory cards into their laptop computers, select and caption the images and transmit them by cellphone back to their publication's picture desk. This logistical advantage can work from the football stadium across town or from a news event in a foreign country. It is particularly advantageous when covering events close to deadline.

Conversion to digital has brought many economic advantages to news organizations. Substantial savings result from converting from a wet-chemistry darkroom to a digital operation. They include the costs of film, photographic paper and chemistry, which are no longer needed. A roll of film, for example, can only be used once, but a computer chip can be erased and reused continually. Another savings is the overhead cost of maintaining the darkroom itself which typically consumed sizeable space. There are savings from not having to dispose of dangerous chemicals, which is also a plus for the environment. Although considerable investment is required for digital cameras and the computer hardware, software and storage space required for a digital photographic system, the conversion brings a net savings.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to the organization is an operational one. Concurrent with the development of digital photography, newspapers and magazines transformed their printing process from the traditional

system where printers composed pages in a backshop to one where editors and designers produced pages on computers in the newsroom. This computerized pagination requires computer-compatible images. Many publications also have Online editions, and digital photographs meld smoothly into the production of these World Wide Web sites. Online editions offer a major advantage to photojournalists who can get more of their work published and have it available to the public for a longer time. Newsprint is expensive, and space for photographs is limited. There are no comparable limitations on displaying several images from a news event or an enterprise project on the Web, and they can remain Online as long as the publication chooses to archive them. Many newspapers, notably The Washington Post, have Website branches that showcase the work of their photojournalists.

How has it changed photojournalism education?

Journalism education has followed rather than led the transition to digital photojournalism. As the industry moved increasingly to digital technologies, schools and departments of journalism eventually followed in order to prepare their majors for internships and jobs in the profession. Again this was a two stage process; scanning and the electronic darkroom entered the curriculum in the early to mid 1990s, while schools retained traditional cameras and darkrooms. Typically, student photojournalists would shoot and process film, then scan negatives. As the price of digital cameras dropped and the quality and capacities increased, many schools of journalism invested in digital cameras and auxiliary equipment, and made the transition from wet-chemistry darkrooms to computer labs in the late 1990s and early 21st century. Many student photojournalists work for college/university newspapers, so the same advantages in terms of deadlines and logistics apply to them as to the professionals. The cost and organization advantages apply to the publishers of student print media.

Regarding teaching the skills and technology required: While complex, most digital cameras can be learned in one or two sessions and mastered with repeated use. Somewhat more time and instruction is required for learning digital editing software such as Adobe Photoshop, the industry standard image manipulation program. Most photojournalism instructors devote a few class sessions to a Photoshop orientation, then expect the students to become proficient as they use the software for the rest of the semester.

Digital photography has not altered the most important aspects of photojournalism pedagogy including instilling the ethics and values of the profession, the formal aesthetics of photography, how to think visually and journalistically, how to work various kinds of assignments, etc.

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What are the ethical issues in digital photography?

Historically, photographs have been altered by the tabloid press by cutting and pasting together prints or combining several negatives on a single print. Often the seams were concealed by painting with airbrushes. A trained eye could spot such manipulations, but with the advent of digital photography it became possible to manipulate images so subtly that the changes were undetectable. Content could be added, deleted or moved around inside the image. Several notorious cases of such manipulation occurred, particularly in the magazine industry. Leaders in photojournalism saw this new capability for seamless manipulation as a threat to the credibility of the photographic image and thus to the profession itself and reacted.

The National Press Photographers Association, the professional organization for still and video photographers, responded by prominently publicizing cases of manipulation in its *News Photographer Magazine* and by adding to its code of ethics a strong prohibition against digital manipulation. It now reads:

As journalists, we believe that credibility is our greatest asset. In documentary photojournalism, it is wrong to alter the content of a photograph in any way (electronically or in the darkroom) that deceives the public. We believe the guidelines for fair and accurate reporting should be the criteria for judging what may be done electronically to a photograph. (NPPA, 1999)

In practice, most news organizations relax this stricture. Magazines which consider their covers as an essential element in newsstand marketing routinely alter or enhance cover images. Many newspapers have one standard for the news and sports sections and another for feature sections. Because digital photography has made it very easy to produce conceptual illustrations, many news organizations do publish them. It is considered essential to label such images as illustrations, with the expectation that the readers will not take them literally.

It seems safe to predict that the future of photojournalism will continue to follow technological developments in digital photography. While there may be a few scattered news operations that the revolution has not yet touched, the profession has undergone a technological transformation.

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